

Look at these worlds

spinning out of nothingness

That is within your power. RUMI

POSSIBILITIES

by **PATRICK O'NEILL**

THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE NEW YEAR is the time for looking ahead, for dreaming and planning. It is associated with new possibilities and the belief that creativity and enterprise are more powerful than the status quo.

Story continued inside...

“I am not an optimist or a pessimist, but a possibilist.”

MAX LERNER, AUTHOR AND COLUMNIST

POSSIBILITIES (continued)

The ability to envision the future – including assessing opportunities, obstacles, problems and solutions – is called foresight. Foresight is the practice of casting the eyes forward to see “a field of possibilities”, the full spectrum of opportunities and choices that would give birth to a more meaningful future. In this context, a *field* refers to an open, fertile expanse in the mind where ideas can be incubated and explored. *Possibility* is the potential and vehicle for something new, better or different to occur.



PATRICK O'NEILL

“How many ideas have there been in the history of man which were unthinkable ten years before they appeared?”

DOSTOYEVSKY

Most people believe the source of *possibility* is the mind alone. Conventional wisdom detects only the place where possibility emerges in conscious awareness, not its source. The heart is the cradle of possibility. It is the heart, working with the mind, that informs us of what is most meaningful in our lives – the relationships, work, activities and contributions that bring us the most happiness and satisfaction. The heart is an organ of vision.

“It is not wisdom to be only wise / And on the inward vision close the eyes / But it is wisdom to believe the heart.”

GEORGE SANTAYANA

The Field of Possibilities contains all the creative thoughts, aspirations and actions that can be generated to accomplish a goal. It is a limitless landscape of pure potential. There are always far more possibilities than the human imagination can apprehend.

THE SIX REQUIREMENTS FOR POSSIBILITY

While everyone has access to the field of possibilities, some people seem more able to discover innovative and creative ideas, approaches, and opportunities, than others. Albert Einstein puzzled about the mystery involved in the creative process: “The intellect has little to do on the road to discovery,” he remarked. “There comes a leap in consciousness, call it intuition or what you will, and the solution comes to you and you don’t know how or why.”

While the creative process remains a mystery, the conditions for *possibility thinking* are a little easier to identify. The people who excel in exploring the field of possibilities generally exhibit six attributes. They are:

- 1. Respect** The ability to look past fixed perspectives is a definition of respect. Remember to approach and examine possibilities with humility and respect – especially those possibilities and ideas you may not fully understand or appreciate. The unfamiliar can only be approached with curiosity, patience and a willingness to explore differences without prejudice and fear. “A new idea is delicate,” wrote Charles H. Brower in *Advertising Age* magazine. “It can be killed by a sneer or a yawn; it can be stabbed to death by a quip and worried to death by a frown on the right man’s brow.”
- 2. Sufficient** A firm belief in our own abilities allows us to explore possibilities without shutting down. Self-worth is the conviction that our resources – our knowledge, skills, character qualities and resourcefulness – are sufficient support in the encounter with a new idea, even those ideas that challenge the status quo. Such conviction is the foundation of confidence. By maintaining self-worth and self-trust, we can explore new possibilities that take us beyond the boundaries of conventional thinking into the territory of pure creativity. “There is a world of difference between a strong ego, which is essential, and a large ego – which can be destructive,” wrote Lee Iacocca in his autobiography. “The guy with the strong ego knows his own strength. He’s confident... But the guy with the large ego is always looking for recognition. He constantly needs to be patted on the back.”

3. Open Possibilities do not reveal their presence to those with preconceptions. All assumptions, opinions, assessments and inherited beliefs are best left at the entrance to the field of possibilities. Preconceptions render visible only that which has been previously seen and experienced, leaving the new and unfamiliar hidden. Daniel J. Boorstin, writing in the Washington Post, suggested, “The great obstacle to discovery is not ignorance – it is the illusion of knowledge.” Boorstin confirms that we are conditioned to perceive the world in relatively fixed and static patterns, filtered by past experience, beliefs and preconceptions. The belief we already know something stifles curiosity, receptivity and wonder, the attributes most associated with openness. Through openness and curiosity we can break free of this kind of conditioning to explore possibilities we may have never considered.

4. Flexible The ability to change is also a requirement of possibility. Many of us say we are open to change. What may be truer is that we are committed to controlling *if*, *when* and *how* we change. In physics, the definition of strength used to be measured by an object’s ability to exert force. The new definition of strength is *flexibility*, the ability to bend without damage or injury. Exploring possibilities requires that we be like clay and allow ourselves to be shaped and molded by what we experience. Without flexibility, we shut down the field of possibilities and fall prey to fixed perspectives, rigidity and dogmatism. Fluency is a requirement for exploration, insight and discovery.

5. Optimistic Optimism is the expression of hope. It is derived from the Latin, *optimum*, and is the presumption of good prevailing. Working with possibilities requires a degree of optimism; without it we mishandle new ideas and potential through our own negativity and preconceptions about what is valuable and what will work.

Sometimes it seems far easier – and more fashionable – to be a pessimist. Sardonic humour certainly has a large audience! For those concerned that optimism breeds delusion, a distinction may be necessary. Pessimism is not critical thinking. It is the presumption that bad and unpleasant things will predominate. This attitude is a possibility-slayer. Perhaps the author and historian Lewis Mumford discovered the right balance when he asserted: “I’m a pessimist about probabilities. I’m an optimist about possibilities.”

6. Courageous Intellectual courage is also required to work with possibilities. It doesn’t take much gumption to believe what everyone else believes, follow the crowd and stick to the status quo. It takes a lot of

nerve to think for yourself, explore new territory, and overturn conventional thinking through new ideas. William James understood the challenge well. “A new idea is first condemned as ridiculous and then dismissed as trivial...” he wrote, “...until finally, it becomes what everybody knows.”

THE OBSTRUCTIONS TO POSSIBILITY

“The vast majority of human beings dislike and even actually dread all notions with which they are not familiar...Hence it comes about that at their first appearance innovators have generally been persecuted and always derided as fools and madmen.”

ALDOUS HUXLEY

Possibility thinking requires a degree of freedom and courage to explore new territory. It is much harder work for those who carry perceptual baggage on the expedition to knowledge. Where possibilities are absent, hopelessness and despair take root. The theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel offers an intriguing suggestion to restore the primacy of possibility in those conditions. “Despair is not due to failures,” he writes “...but to the inability to hear deeply and personally the challenge that confronts us.”

There are at least six obstructions to possibility thinking. These hold true for individuals and groups.

The Past

Possibility is less available to those whose attention has been arrested by the unfinished business of the past. The past can act as a filter through which we view the present and the future. It can narrow our field of vision dramatically and lead to the dismissal of new ideas and perspectives. How many times have we heard “...we tried that before, it didn’t work then and it won’t work now.” “Be not the slave of your own past,” warns Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Cynicism

Possibility thinking is not available to the cynic. Sitting on the sidelines of life, convinced the game is rigged, the cynic allows disappointment and bitterness to overcome hope. Joseph Epstein, writing in the New Yorker magazine suggested, “Scratch a cynic and underneath, as often as not, you will find a dead idealist.” The antidote to cynicism is

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commitment and creativity. With our eyes turned toward all that we are committed to – people, places, activities and things – we begin to throw off the poison of cynicism and reclaim our belief that possibilities are urgently necessary to address the conditions we complain about but allow to persist through inaction.

Intolerance for Intellectual Discomfort

Possibilities require the ability to hold the creative tension that occurs when a new possibility emerges and challenges the status quo. Creative tension is the “perceptual stretch” required to explore a possibility. Sometimes, it creates a certain kind of intellectual discomfort as one considers unfamiliar thoughts or approaches. Paradox, contradictions, revolutionary ideas, challenges and conflicts can all produce a disruption to our orderly, and sometimes sleepy, notions. Those committed to possibilities welcome the experience of intellectual discomfort and recognize it as the fertile ground of creativity. Between a possibility and the status quo is the aperture for the emergence of a new possibility.

Risk Avoidance

Possibility is not available to the risk adverse. Because of the addiction to remaining safe and in control, most people fall prey to the status quo. They strike “the Prisoner’s Bargain”. The Prisoner’s Bargain requires that we give up the freedom to explore possibilities for the cage of the status quo. We abandon our dreams to stay within our comfort zone, and settle for the illusion of safety and security that accompanies conventional ideas, behavior and aspirations. Courage is required to break free from the cage of constrained imagination and regain the excitement that accompanies learning, growth and development.

Pessimism

Pessimism is the tendency *to see, anticipate, or emphasize only bad or undesirable outcomes or results*. From this perspective, possibility is undermined by self-pity, which is the root cause of pessimism. Pessimism always requires a self-fulfilling prophet. Being right about what’s wrong feeds self-pity and keeps vision focused on the sorry state of the self rather than on what has heart and meaning. The pessimist, like the cynic, has a fixed perspective. As Thomas Hardy reminds us: “It is the only view of life in which you can never be disappointed.”

Egotism

When entering the field of possibilities, check the ego at the door. Pride, and an inflated sense of your own importance, acts like a magnet to draw forth only those possibilities that can be used to feed the ego. There is a tendency amongst the self-important to ignore, dismiss, or misunderstand anything that does not feed the voracious appetite of vanity. Everything else will remain hidden or ignored, especially problems and dilemmas. But as the old proverb predicts, “Pride goeth before a fall.” It is easy to become lost in a narcissistic hall of mirrors where every choice feeds delusion.

CONCLUSION

Every leader has a responsibility to explore possibilities. While the beginning of the year is traditionally associated with forward planning, it is imperative year-round.

Through respect, sufficiency, openness, flexibility, optimism, and courage, leaders steward the field of possibility, not just for themselves, but also for others who are committed to pursuing meaningful goals.

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